Beautiful Customs and Traditions of the Christmas Season

By VALENTINE YARNALL
in Philadelphia Public Ledger

BUT do you know aught of the first observance of Christmas? Of the first celebration by the masses in general of Christmas as a great holiday? And do you know the origin of the various things that are a part of our modern Christmas — the Yule log, the mistletoe, the holly wreath and the Christmas card?

The word Christmas is "Cristes Maesse," the Mass of Christ, first found in 1038, and "Cristes-messe" in 1131. In Dutch it is "Kerstmisse;" in Latin, "Dies Natalis;" in Italian, "Il natale," and in German, "Weinachtsfest." These are, of course, based on the Christian celebration of Christmas as the birthday of Christ.

We are told that the pagan countries of the world held festivals before the birth of Christ and that as Christianity spread the early church sought to replace these pagan festivals with Christmas festival. The old pagan nations of antiquity had a tendency to worship the sun as the giver of light and life. These festivals took place near the winter solstice, the shortest day in the year. This holiday was called Saturnalia by the Romans and celebrated with great merriment.

Among the people of the north great fires were kindled to Odin and Thor and sacrifices of men and cattle were made. The ancient Goths and Saxons called this festival Yule, which is preserved today in the Scottish word for Christmas. The early Teutons celebrated by decorating giant fir trees as celestial sun trees. The lights represented the flashes of lightning overhead; the golden apples, nuts and balls symbolized the sun, the moon and the stars, while animals hung in the branches were as sacrifices.

It is related that Christmas was not among the early festivals of the church. The first evidence of the feast, according to church historians, is from Egypt. And December 25 was not the day celebrated with any uniformity in the early days of the church. The celebration of December 25 spread to most parts of the East in the fourth and fifth centuries. At Rome the Nativity was celebrated December 25 before 354; in the East, at Constantinople, not before 379.

As Christianity supplanted paganism, many of the old customs were carried along to be handed down through the ages. We have distinct evidences of Christmas celebration in "Merrie old England" in the Anglo-Saxon days of Alfred. The holiday season then began December 16 and ended January 6. With the rise of Puritanism the existence of Christmas for a time was threatened. And this extended to this country with those Puritans who brought an anti-Christmas feeling to New England.

By degree of the Roundhead parliament in 1643 and the general court of Massachusetts in 1659, the observance of Christmas was officially banned by England and the New England colonists. But the restoration of English royalty brought about the restoration of Christmas, and in 1681 Massachusetts repealed the law of 1659. And so Christmas has remained through the centuries and is celebrated now through the entire civilized world.

Always, but particularly at Advent, the Norwegian makes much of hospitality. On Christmas day, if you were to call to see him, his first courtesy would be to offer you a pipe of tobacco, and at dinner, which is usually more simple than that of other races, national hymns are sung between the courses.

In Sweden, where in truth it is evident that "cleanliness is next to godliness," the industrious housewife has the entire house renovated for the festival. Nor do they forget their annual friends, for before they sit down to their own dinner a sheaf of corn is fastened to a pole and placed in the garden. This is done in order that the birds may not be without their share of the enjoyment.

Another beautiful custom in Scandinavia is that of placing in a row a pair of shoes belonging to each member of the household. This is done on Christmas eve, and signifies that they will live together in harmony for another year.

When Christmas comes in Germany the whole family prepares to go to church. They form in line, probably in the order of their ages, and, armed with lighted candles, march to the service. As the edifice has no other light than that furnished by the candles, it makes a very pretty effect to see them appearing one by one until they have spread over the entire church. With this service the season is supposed to begin. In every house the tables are spread with all sorts of good things, and the lights are left burning the entire night. This is done in order that the Virgin and the angels will find something to eat when they pass.

Some of the superstitions are very quaint and beautiful. One existing in some parts of Poland and elsewhere is that on the night before Christmas the heavens open and the scene of Jacob's ladder is enacted, this, however, being visible only to saints.

Candles are put in the windows in certain parts of Austria, so that the Christ Child may not stumble in passing through the village.

In Bulgaria they have a curious custom. No one will, if it can possibly be avoided, cross a strange threshold on this day. It was an early custom among these people to put corn in the stockings. The head of the family would sprinkle some in front of the door, saying, "Christ is born," and the reply from the family was, "He is, indeed." More corn was then taken and put in the fire, and wishes would then be made for the family, for the house, for the cattle and for the crops. A brand was saved from the fire and placed in the notch of a tree, that assuring them of plentiful harvests for the coming year.

A maiden in Suabia, in order to know something of the appearance of her future husband, would draw one from a bundle of sticks; if it were short, he would be short; if it were long, he would be tall; if it were crooked—and so on.

Another method of learning of the appearance of a lover (this time his features) would be to pour melted lead into a bowl of water, and, from the shape which the congealed metal took when it cooled, imagine some one who appeared like that.

Christmas eve in Russia is a very bustling time. (Remember, this means prewar and prerevolution times in Russia.) The peasants prepare to, and eventually do, form into a procession and march through the village. They are sure to pass the houses of the nobility, the mayor and other officials, stopping at each one to sing carols and receive, in return, copper. This habit of begging is called "Kolenda." A masquerade follows the procession, and as soon as the evening star arises the supper is spread.

Paris indulges in one great fete the night before Christmas. It finds everyone eating a sumptuous dinner, and the restaurants are taxed to their greatest capacity, for on Christmas eve, if at no other time of the year he has a full meal, the Frenchman has it then. At the Foundling hospital in Lyons a practice is maintained which (in the light of recent statements about the decreasing birth rate in France) is somewhat humorous. A royal welcome is prepared for the first infant received that day. This special honor, however, has a very beautiful meaning—it being intended to contrast the humble story of our Savior with that of this foundling.

In sunny Italy a sumptuous banquet is prepared, consisting mainly of fish cooked in many different ways. Fish is eaten for a week previous to Christmas and its feast day. The churches are largely attended and the Italian is careful to see that his children go also. The children have their part of the rejoicing in what is called the "urn of fate." In some receptacle, preferably an urn, are placed written fortunes, and the children and their friends, in the order of their ages, draw lots. Great merriment is occasioned by some of the ludicrous results. This is to them what the Christmas tree is to the American child.

Peru presents a scene of varied activity at this time of the year; people are bustling to and fro and having a jolly good time; suddenly the church bell rings, calling them to the midnight mass. The interest of the next morning, Christmas day, is usually centered about a bull fight, the most popular one of the year and one in which it is said the women take more interest than the men. After this there is a religious pro-

From Germany we get the Christmas tree; Santa Claus from Holland; from Belgium and France the Christmas stocking, and a "Merry Christmas" from England.

And a Merry Christmas it was, with its ruddy glow from the kindling Yule logs and the gleam from the pearly berries of the mistletoe. There are early records of the mistletoe having been used as a decoration, and it was held in great reverence by the Celtic nations.

The bringing in of the Yule log had origin in a really interesting manner. In the days when England was young it was the custom of the serfs to bring fuel with them to the baronial hall. The dinner which they received there was to last as long as the wood burned. This was called bringing a "wet wheel." The wet wheel was usually a green branch or limb of a tree, and it is obvious how, since their dinner depended upon the size of the stick furnished, the stick eventually became larger and larger until it assumed the proportions of a log. The term "Yule" which is prefixed to it simply signifies that it is a log of the "Yule" season.

In the old days the feast of St. Martin, November 1, opened the Christmas season. From that time on mummery and merriment were king.

Elizabethan England, and even England of a later period, is rich in traditions and superstitious beliefs.

Anyone turning a mattress on Christmas day would die within the year; but the baking of bread was commended, and loaves baked on that day would never grow moldy.

Yule cakes were supposed to have miraculous power, and on them representations of Jesus were sometimes pressed.

In some places in Oxfordshire every maid servant had the privilege, and frequently exercised it, of asking a man for ivy to decorate the house. If the man assented, well and good; but if he refused, the maid stole a pair of his breeches. The next day they could be seen nailed to the gate on the highway.

The first maid to pass under this evergreen on Christmas day was sure to be married within the year, and equally sure of being kissed—for that was the penalty to be paid by any maid who passed under it. After each offense a berry was plucked, while the privilege was supposed to cease with the last berry.

For anyone but a dark-skinned person to cross the threshold first on Christmas day was considered unlucky in parts of Scotland, the reason for this being that Judas had red hair. No one would think of giving a light or matches at this time in certain counties, and the bees were supposed to sing all night Christmas eve, although previous to this a sprig of holly had been placed on the hive. Mortals who die on that night are certain of immediate and perennial happiness.

But enough of these children of the imagination, citizens of the past. Do we not hear, just outside our chamber door, a youthful choir singing a carol, as did Washington Irving on that Christmas morning when he was at Bracebridge hall? And, through the night, were there not voices either blended with, or a part of, our dreams, which sang the news of a Savior born?

The singing of carols is not peculiar to England, where it was introduced by the Puritans. In France they are similar in character to those of the nation across the Channel, and are called noels. In Italy the Calabrian shepherds are itinerant musicians and choral singers. At the season of Advent they come down from the mountains to the cities singing their peculiar hill music. Lady Morgan gives an interesting account of the piety of these shepherds. Having seen them stop every year in front of a carpenter's shop in Rome, to sing and play, she questioned them of the reason for this. They replied that in that way they gave honor to St. Joseph, who was a carpenter also. The name of these singers is piferari.

The word "carol" is really formed upon two other words: Cantare, to sing, and rola, an interjection of joy. Therefore, the term carol need not be confined to Christmas music, although that is the general use of the world.

In Wales and Ireland the custom of singing carols is better preserved than in England, as is also the case in France.

Of the origin of the Christmas tree, we have many beautiful legends, of which that of St. Boniface is not the least. Unfortunately, it is too long to have more than a mere mention of the recognition that is due it in an article of this character.

A Scandinavian myth tells of its having sprung from blood-saturated soil, where two lovers met a violent death, and always thereafter on Christmas eve lights were seen to burn in the branches.

On of the French legends of the thirteenth century speaks of a gigantic tree which the hero discovers. Its branches were covered with burning candles, and on the top floated a vision of a child. Not understanding the meaning of this, he asked the pope for an explanation. The pope's reply was that the tree represented mankind; the child, the Savior; the candles, good and bad human beings.

Some writers have found a connection between the original Christmas tree and Yggdrasill, the giant ash tree of Scandinavian mythology, which spread its branches over the whole world; others point to the pine tree used in the Bacchanalia, which was crowned with the image of Bacchus, and again there are those who speak of the custom of the ancient Egyptians, who at the time of the winter solstice decorated their houses with the branches of the date palm—these are all referred to as probable progenitors of our custom of trimming a tree and decorating our buildings. Similar trees were used on festive occasions by the Hindus, sometimes artificial and of priceless value, being formed of pearls and other precious stones.

Whatever may be said, there is no certain knowledge of the use of the trees as we now have it before the sixteenth century. We find it appearing at Strassburg, in Germany, at about that time, and for 200 years it was maintained along the Rhine. After this period, during which it was gaining strength, it suddenly flashed over all Germany. This was at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in the 50 years succeeding this sudden growth it had struck its roots into all Christendom.

The preparation of it for the eyes of the young in Germany, the country where the modern practice originated, is an affair of great secrecy. It is kept in a separate room, which is locked, and into whose mysteries none but the mother is initiated.

At six o'clock in the evening of the day before Christmas the door is opened and in the children rush to receive their presents, which are hung on and spread all about the tree. Then the children present their gifts to their parents, and then to each other, and the whole surprise is over before Christmas eve has passed. Probably this explains the lassitude that is experienced the next day—which feeling, nevertheless, is not solely characteristic of Germany.

America received its first tree through the German immigrant, who brought it with him. But for a long time the festival did not receive recognition because of the laws forbidding it. It was not until the latter part of the eighteenth century that these laws were repealed, and after that it took some time for it to emerge from the state of quiescence into which it had been forced.

To our country belong the honor of being the birthplace of the Christmas card, which, sadly enough, together with other Christmas remembrances, has degenerated in some cases to a mere business convention.

The custom first started with the school pieces which the schoolboy of the middle nineteenth century was to read at the annual school exercises always given at this time of the year. The original flourishes of embellishment on these cards, upon which the pieces to be read were written, grew into an elaborately designed poem or maxim, good wishes or what not.

Tusser, in his "Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry," said, and wisely, too:

"At Christmas play and make good cheer,
For Christmas comes but once a year."

Happy are those who profit by this advice, and more happy those who maintain, in some form, this spirit through the 364 days which intervene before another such time returns.

PROMINENT PEOPLE

CONTROLS ALL NAVAL OPERATIONS

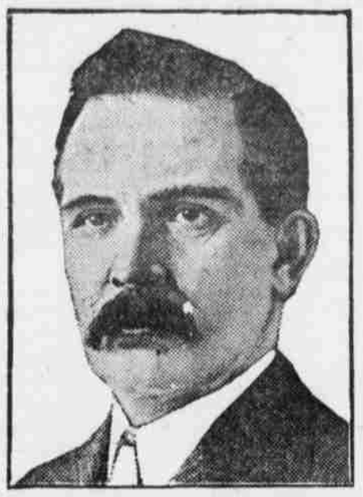
The most important man in the navy today is Admiral William S. Benson, ranking officer in the service and chief of naval operations. Yet little is heard of him outside naval circles.

Outwardly or officially, Admiral Benson is "charged with the operations of the fleet and with the preparation and readiness of plans for its use in war." When congress created the particular billet which he now fills on May 11, 1915, the duties of the chief of naval operations were thus defined. Admiral Benson, then a rear admiral, took the job and the public promptly forgot he was there. When the war came there were so many other things to occupy the public mind that no one apparently has sought to disturb Admiral Benson's official seclusion.

Outside his door on the second floor of the navy department is a "positively no admittance" sign. A distinguished visitor to Washington inquired the other day whose office it was and when informed blandly inquired, "Who is Benson?" Evidently he was one of the unacquainted land variety.

Deciding matters of naval strategy in home and foreign waters, looking after the details of every phase of America's naval war program ashore or afloat, and supervising all matters relating directly or indirectly to naval war plans, these are the most important of the duties which Admiral Benson has to perform. From a practical viewpoint he is commander in chief of the navy ashore and afloat. He is to the navy what the chief of staff is to the army.

MAY REVOLUTIONIZE MOTOR POWER



Scientific tests are still being made under authorization of congress of a wonderful device of Garabed T. Giragossian, an Armenian inventor and mechanic of Boston, which if all that is claimed for it proves true, will revolutionize the motor power of the world.

The inventor calls his device a "free energy" generator and it is significant that congress deemed the matter worthy of scientific tests. Just what the engine is, is not made known. It is claimed by the inventor that it can drive a battleship any distance without stop for fuel, for this strange device uses no fuel; that it can propel an airplane around the world with armor heavy enough to turn aside the heaviest shells, and perform other feats that seem most uncanny.

In speaking of his invention, Mr. Giragossian says:

"I have not overcome gravity or anything of that kind. The source of the energy is already existent and I am going to utilize it by means I have discovered. It is concentrated. If we want to make use of electricity out of the earth we concentrate on that. It is necessary to build boilers and engines to produce thousands of horse power out of coal. My device is utilized in such a way that it is almost condensed energy. The source of the energy is very great. It is portable and you can carry it from place to place.

"My engine will produce power to turn something, that is all. It does not require any heat. It can be put in any room, in any cellar. The principle is so extremely simple that the minute you see it you will say to yourself: 'Well, why didn't I think of that before.'"

LOOKS AFTER COUNTRY'S REVENUE

"He is always good at figures," said Danny's teacher, when talking with his mother after she had called at the school. This happened in 1877, and 40 years has not changed Daniel C. Roper. At least Uncle Sam doesn't think so, because he appointed him to probably the hardest job of a non-military nature to be found in Washington. His office door reads, "Collector of Internal Revenue," and as the revenue has been increased several times it is going to be some job. He began his preparation for this career by attending Trinity college, and after he was graduated from that North Carolina institution he continued by attending the National university of Washington, D. C., from which he emerged four years later ready for a fight with the world.

Soon after his college work ended he became very much interested in the cotton and weaving industries. It was Mr. Roper who developed a scheme of collecting cotton statistics by a count at frequent intervals during the harvesting period of the number of bales turned out at the gins. This in itself was quite an achievement, and the government recognized his merit by sending him on a survey of the textile industries in America and in Europe. From this data he was enabled to compile a textbook, which has been used as authentic information by experts in this country, as well as abroad.

CUSTODIAN OF ENEMY PROPERTY

Arrangements were made at a conference between President Wilson and A. Mitchell Palmer, custodian of enemy property, to put into complete operation the provisions of the trading-with-the-enemy law for custody of property in this country of German citizens and those of countries allied with Germany.

Receipts of enemy property already has begun, the first receipts being a draft for $100,000 vountarily tendered the custodian, who promptly invested it in Liberty bonds.

Within a short time property worth millions of dollars will be in the custodian's hands. President Wilson soon will issue an executive order which will authorize opening of branch bureaus for receipt of enemy property.

The ultimate disposition of property taken over by his office, Mr. Palmer explained, rests with congress, which must decide whether it shall be confiscated or merely held in trust during the war by the custodian as a trustee. An executive order fixes the salary of Mr. Palmer at $5,000 a year and directs that he give a bond of $100,000.